

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 381

EA 016 341

AUTHOR Blumberg, Arthur  
TITLE Supervision in Weakly Normed Systems: The Case of the Schools.  
PUB DATE Apr 83  
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 11-15, 1983).  
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Change Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; Informal Organization; \*Instructional Improvement; Job Performance; Organizational Change; \*Organizational Climate; Supervision; \*Supervisors; Supervisory Methods; \*Teacher Improvement; \*Work Environment

## ABSTRACT

Instructionally, schools tend to be "weakly normed" organizational systems in which teachers bring relatively little pressure upon each other to change and/or improve their classroom performance. Because teachers tolerate a wide range of behavior among their colleagues and are reluctant to offer criticism of each other, those responsible for improving instruction (principals, helping teachers, and supervisors) are left in an organizationally untenable position. Bereft of organizational support in their work, supervisors are left with two broad strategies for accomplishing their organizational mission. One unlikely strategy is to attempt to change the overall organizational/normative character of the schools. A more plausible strategy is to take schools as they are on the twin assumptions that teaching is a highly personal and idiosyncratic activity and that teachers want to improve their instruction. According to this second approach, the most effective supervisor would then be that person who gains the personal confidence of as many teachers as possible--offering advice only by invitation--and thereby establishes a reputation for being a helpful, good listener with something to offer that teachers perceive to be of value. (JBM)

\*\*\*\*\*  
\* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
\* from the original document. \*  
\*\*\*\*\*

ED239381

# Supervision in Weakly Normed Systems: The Case of the Schools<sup>1</sup>

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as  
received from the person or organization  
originating it.  
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve  
reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-  
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE  
position or policy.

by

Arthur Blumberg  
School of Education  
Syracuse University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS  
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

*Arthur Blumberg*

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This paper represents the linking of two interests of mine. The first, supervision in the schools and the behavior of supervisors, is of rather long standing, dating back to the middle 1960's when Edmond Amidon and I initiated some studies of the interpersonal behavioral styles of school supervisors. The second, a concern with schools as adult work-settings, is of more recent vintage. It came into focus in the last few years as I found myself becoming interested in what adult life in the schools--aside from the classroom--is like. This interest has led me to spend a fair amount of time meeting informally with teachers, individually and in small groups, as I inquired into what it meant for them as an adult to be employed in a school. The basic questions in these exchanges were "What's it like? What factors govern your relations with other teachers? With the principal?" and so forth. I have also taught a couple of what I must term exploratory courses entitled Schools as Work-Settings" in which I and my students have tried to approach the topic in a somewhat more systematic way than might characterize

---

<sup>1</sup>Prepared for presentation at a symposium of the Special Interest Group on Instructional Supervision, American Educational Research Association, Montreal, 1983.

EA 016 341

an open-ended interview. The result of all this, besides providing me with a research agenda for the next couple of years, has been to enable me to start to view schools as work-places in a more organic, less mechanistic manner than I had previously, a view that I find to be intellectually exciting. Another result has been the emergence of some tentative formulations that may describe schools as adult work organizations in ways that have not previously been attended to, at least in systematic fashion. For the most part, the data upon which my remarks will be based is "soft" in the sense that they are not based on the results of rigorously designed studies. However, I believe they are powerful enough to permit me to advance my arguments, if tentatively, in a way that will stimulate intellectual curiosity and question.

The underlying theme that guides my thinking in this paper is that the behavior of any organizational actor is somehow imbedded in the structural characteristics of the organization itself. In gestalt terms, the character of the organization, its system of interacting roles and role expectations for example, becomes the ground for the figure of individual and group behavior. If we wish to inquire, then, into what supervisors do and how they behave, it becomes necessary to view their behavior and the supervisory process itself, against the background of the culture of the work place. People do not enact roles in a vacuum. In Lewinian terms, the enactment of

roles--what supervisors do, in this case--becomes a function of one's personality and one's perception of the situation. The main argument of this paper is that the situation in focus includes not only the setting of supervisor and teacher meeting, for example, but the psycho-social setting of the school, as well.

How best to think about this psycho-social setting so that what happens in schools--particularly the character of both formal and informal adult-adult relations--make sense, even if it is not always the type of "good" sense that one might like to associate with the behavior of teachers and administrators? The picturesque metaphor of schools as "organized anarchies" (March, 1978) is helpful in a sort of stage-setting way, even if its use tends to provoke knowing smiles on the part of school people. It does seem to clarify in a global way the manner in which teachers and administrators experience their work-a-day life. More helpful, though, for the present purpose because it leads me to more systematic thinking about schools as work organizations is the "schools as loosely coupled systems"<sup>2</sup> concept suggested by Weick (1976). There are numbers of inferences

---

<sup>2</sup>"Loose coupling," I might add, may be in danger of becoming, if it already hasn't, the latest in the long series of fads or slogans that have attracted educators through the years. It will be unfortunate, if this is the case, as I think the idea is a powerful one that can be of immense use to both researchers and practitioners.

that can be made about the character of role and organizational relationships in schools if one takes the loosely-coupled perspective as an organizing principle. For example, one can predict low task interdependence among teachers, low influence potential of the principal vis-a-vis teachers over classroom matters, a weak goal orientation, and so forth.

For the purpose of this paper, though, it is the character and content of the normative structure of schools that derives from their loosely-coupled nature that assumes importance. Based on the assumptions of low task interdependence and organizational goal orientations that are more for public consumption (Lortie, 1975) than energy mobilizing for teachers, the position taken here is that schools tend to be weakly normed systems relative to the task behavior of teachers. That is, as far as issues of how teachers teach, what expectations they have for students, how devoted they are to their work, and so forth, are concerned the schools present an image of highly individuated organizations that permit wide variation in job performance. This image also suggests that any group pressures toward behavior change, or excellence, for that matter, that may be present are minimal. This is not to say that there are no strong norms operative in schools. There are, indeed, but as we shall see later, they seem to be concerned with matters that are non-instructional.

Some elaboration is needed here concerning a workable and instructive concept of norms. I take as my basic reference

the work of Jackson (1960). Starting with the idea that "A norm that exists in a group involves shared tendencies to approve or disapprove a particular dimension of behavior" (p. 138). Jackson proposes a way of thinking about norms that involves the return potential that may exist for a person concerning his or her behavior with reference to any particular group norm. What is involved is a type of exchange that deals with the question, "If I invoke behavior X with regard to norm Y, what may I expect in terms of group approval or disapproval?" In other words, the question deals with the range of tolerable or approved behavior concerning any particular norm which a person may enact and expect to receive some measure of group approval. Schematically, the question is illustrated in Figure 1 (Jackson, p. 134).

The picture in Figure 1 is that of a norm that suggests a fairly narrow range of behavior in which one can engage and not receive disapproval; which has a sharp rise and fall; and which provides high approval for a particular behavior but sharply decreased approval and high disapproval for others. This is surely an over-simplified elaboration of Figure 1, but it lays the groundwork for the discussion that follows.

In the context of a more comprehensive and long-range study of schools as workplaces that we are conducting at Syracuse, a body of qualitative data concerning school norms, as yet uncoded but nonetheless interesting and important,

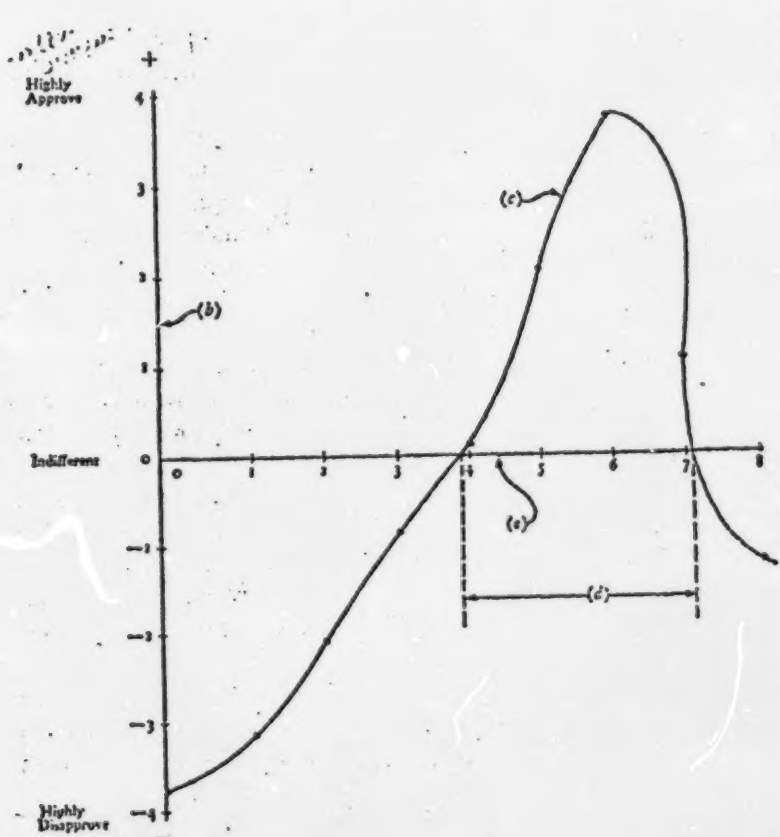
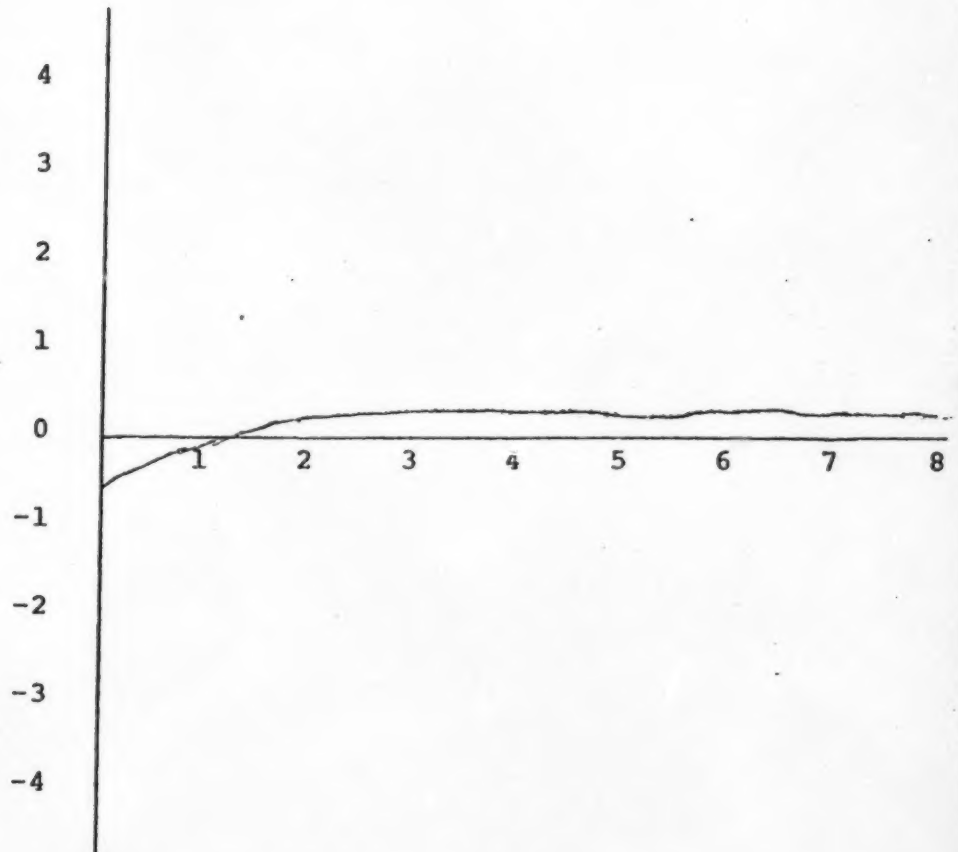


FIG. 1.—Schematic diagram showing the *Return Potential Model* for representing norms. (a) A *behavior dimension*; (b) an *evaluation dimension*; (c) a *return potential curve*, showing the distribution of approval-disapproval among the members of a group over the whole range of behavior; (d) the range of tolerable or approved behavior.

has started to emerge. We have asked teachers, individually and in groups, to tell us about the group norms that exert pressure on them to enact particular behaviors, or not to enact others, during the course of work. First, and perhaps very symbolic of adult life in the schools, it needs to be said that teachers appear to experience difficulty thinking in normative terms. This seems to be particularly true relative to norms that might be concerned with issues of the quality of teaching. It is not so much that teachers don't know who is the best teacher in the school--or the worst--as it seems to be that there are few pressures induced on teachers by other teachers to alter or improve their teaching. This is not to say that pressure to become better does not exist. Rather, the point is that it is most likely to emanate from sources other than one's colleagues--the principal or central office supervisor, for example. Given this state of affairs, a return potential curve that pictures school norms relative to effectiveness of teaching looks, in most cases, like Figure 2.

An interpretation of this norm would be as follows: There is an extremely wide range of tolerable or approved behavior. Only a small part of the curve falls below zero approval. Further, the curve is, for all intents and purposes, a flat one and it does not dip below zero approval point once it moves above it. What this suggests is, that as far as other teachers are concerned, for most intents and purposes one can be as

Highly  
Approve



Highly  
Disapprove

Figure 2. Schematic diagram of a Return Potential Curve whose behavioral dimension is concerned with the effectiveness of teaching

industrious and effective as one chooses to be. If one is minimally effective as a teacher (point 1 on the behavioral dimension) one will, in all likelihood not be subject to any pressure on the part of other teachers to improve. By the same token, a person who is highly effective (point 8) will not be apt to receive any more group approval than one who is, perhaps, mediocre (point 2). As far as the "behavior" of teacher effectiveness, then, it rather appears that schools, in general, are weakly normed. There is tremendous latitude for behavior, little approval or disapproval, and practically no group pressure to become better than you already are.

The reasons for this condition, I believe, are intimately related to the character of the organizational structure of the schools--their loose-coupledness concerning matters of job performance, as it were. The facts of the matter are that the way schools are organized, the role expectations held for teachers by school administrators, the community, and by teachers themselves simply mitigate against the development of a type group interdependence for teaching effectiveness, in this case, that would foster the development of a more powerful normative structure.

This last point, incidentally, should not be misconstrued to suggest that there are no powerful norms that exert influence on a teacher's life in school. Indeed, there do seem to be such norms but, as a rule, they seem to be rather unrelated to the quality of teaching. A couple of examples may suffice to

illustrate the point: One thing that is inadvisable for a teacher to do is to criticize another teacher's teaching behavior publicly. This is a "no-no" and a teacher who persists in doing it will soon find pressures exerted by colleagues to cease that behavior. Another example has to do with the amount of noise that a teacher allows in the classroom. Noise is tolerated to the point where it starts to interfere with the work of adjacent classrooms, regardless of what is going on in that classroom. After that pressure is brought, in one fashion or another, to change the situation.

These two examples are illustrative of what we have called negative sanction norms, by which term is meant that the norm is one for which an individual gets no approval for conforming to it; only disapproval for not conforming. There is no pay-off, for example, from other teachers from one's ability to keep a classroom quiet. There is, however, a negative pay-off if one is unable to do this. It needs to be said, of course, that the existence of negative sanction norms in an organization is not unusual. What may be unusual is that, for the most part according to the data turned up in our early inquiry, they are the only type of norms existing among teachers that have any group-referenced power to them.

In brief summary, then, the basic thesis of this paper is that the behavior of organizational actors is somehow embedded in the structural characteristics of the organization. That characteristic of school organization that has assumed

salience for our discussion has been the content and structure of its normative system. We have suggested that, relative to questions of the quality or effectiveness of teaching (the content), the structure of school norms tends to be weak and flat. That is, they have a very large range of tolerable or approved behavior. In order for a teacher to suffer the wrath of our other teachers as far as teaching behavior is concerned, he or she has to be so ineffective as to, in some way, have that ineffectiveness make life more difficult for other teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Where does this leave the person charged with the responsibility for improving instruction--the principal, the helping teacher, the central office supervisor? Their behavior, like that of teachers, is embedded in the organizational structure. Further, though they are in the organization they are not of it, at least that part of the organization which might be called "teacher territory." Though they were all, at one time or another, an inhabitant of that territory their movement into other roles has removed them from the possibility of still claiming the rights and privileges of those who are full-time residents. Protestations to the contrary, for example, a

---

<sup>3</sup>I must say, parenthetically, that these remarks should not be taken as criticism of teachers. They simply describe the situation that seems to exist. Further, no argument is being made here that schools should be more strongly normed concerning the quality of teaching although it is possible, of course, to make that argument.

principal who maintains that he or she is "really a teacher like everyone else" is engaging in an exercise in self-delusion. Curiously, though, this very separation creates the potential for a freedom of action that may not be available to teachers. A principal can, for example, though few do, take a public position on job performance whereas a teacher cannot in the sense that to do so would be at wide variance with the role expectations of other teachers, thus paving the way for negative sanctions.

Back to the question that opened the previous paragraph. It seems to me that the person with the responsibility for improving instruction is left with almost an organizationally untenable position. This is so, for a number of reasons. I mention a few that seem to be central:

1. The normative structure cannot be depended upon as a source of power or influence on a particular teacher as far as improving his or her teaching is concerned.
2. Intrusion into "teacher territory" on the part of a supervisor is permitted, in most cases, at the option of the teacher. Schools' norms, and these I think are relatively strong, tend to reinforce this option. This is so even if a union contract, for example, mandates "X" number of classroom observations a year. To observe something is certainly not the same thing as having influence on it. In effect, teacher norms

put limits on the extent that supervisors may intrude into "teacher territory."

3. The nature of the reward system in most schools, different from but I think related to their normative system, cannot be effectively used to motivate teachers. Teachers, as a rule, are simply not rewarded by the system for becoming better at their craft.

What I mean, then, by the characterization of the supervisor's position as being "organizationally untenable" is that schools as social systems, either through their normative structure or their related system of rewards, simply seem not to sanction the function of influencing and improving instruction as being organizationally important. This does not mean that individual teachers do not place a value on excellence or that, occasionally, some school faculties do not band together to achieve some instructional goal. It simply means that, as a rule, supervisors tend to be bereft of organizational support in their work. They are, as it were, lonely voices in the night as far as their organizational mission is concerned.

It seems to me there are two broad strategies by which this problem may be confronted. The first is almost millennialist in that it involves efforts to change the organizational, thus the normative, character of the schools. All of us are aware

of some "lighthouse" cases where this has occurred with very positive effects. These instances usually come about because of the influence and, I think, charisma of some very out-of-the ordinary school principal. They are rare visionary birds, however--high risk-takers, high energizers, excellent teachers in their time. And, while I do not wish to criticize principals, it does seem fair to say that few of them are capable of creating their own lighthouse. Most seem rather competent to administer the system as it exists. After all, they grew up in it and were socialized to its values. Their private operating vision of their job--not their public, non-operating one--would seem to focus on being able to run things as smoothly as possible and depend on teachers as individuals to maintain the instructional system much as they were depended upon by their principal when they were classroom teachers. So, though one may be tempted to adhere to the millennial notion of the ideal school, one is probably best advised not to hold one's breath.

The second strategy takes schools where they are. Its basic notion is that, organizationally speaking, schools are not very important for teachers as far as the character of instruction in which they engage is concerned. It also, of necessity, contains two other very basic assumptions about teaching and teachers. The first is that teaching is a highly personal and idiosyncratic activity. The second, very simply, is that most teachers want to be better than they are, though

they may not verbalize it. If, as Lortie's study (1976) has pointed out, the primary rewards and satisfactions that accrue to teachers are intrinsic to the work of teaching, this second assumption is an absolute given.

Though my fantasy world prompts me to support the first strategy, my world of reality must settle for the second. That is, I view the supervisor's task of improving instruction in the weakly normed ethos of the schools as a slow process through which changes, when they occur, may be barely perceptible. Further, the task of supervising (not evaluating) parallels that of teaching in that it, too, is a highly personal and idiosyncratic activity. If it is to be pursued effectively it seems to me that there are certain other givens of life in the schools supervisors need to acknowledge and make part of their own work-life. They start with the one that was focal to this paper--the fact that the normative structure of the faculty as a group is not a source of strength as far as improving the quality of instruction is concerned. Acknowledgment of this should lead a supervisor to attend centrally to the teacher as a person. With this point in mind, some other facts of school life to which a supervisor need attend are:

1. Teachers can and do get along without supervisors. Their work is there for them to do every day, irrespective of whether a supervisor is around.

2. Supervisors can exist organizationally and ritually without teachers but not functionally.
3. If supervision is to be effective as far as resulting in learning and growth for a teacher is concerned it cannot be conceived of as one role occupant meeting another. It needs to be seen, to the contrary, as one person meeting another.
4. Access to a teacher's world by a supervisor needs to be freely given by the teacher. It is incapable of being organizationally mandated. An organization cannot control the entry of one person into the personal world of work of another.
5. In order for a supervisor to gain such access, he or she must be seen by the teacher as having something to offer that the teacher perceives to be of value. That something may be content or methodological expertise, a reputation for being helpful, the reputation for being a good listener, or what have you.
6. Gaining access is precisely that. It means that the possibility exists for influencing the quality of teaching. But without the access no such possibility exists.

It seems to me that as I reread and thought about what I have written here I was playing a familiar tune, one that

suggests that the human side of the supervision process is the recurring refrain of the whole enterprise. But I also think that the quiet and subtle background to the composition--by which I mean, unmusically, the weakly normed structure of the schools--adds credence to the whole idea.

## References

1. Jackson, J. 1960. Structural characteristics of norms. In Henry, N.B. (ed.) Dynamics of Instructional Groups. (The Fifty-ninth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 136-139.
2. Lortie, D. Schoolteacher. 1975. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. March, J. American public school administration: a short analysis. School Review. February, 1978, 86, 217-50.
4. Weick, K. Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. Administration Science Quarterly. March, 1976, 21, 1-19.